Maximizing the Potential of Our Youth with Intellectual Disabilities:
Rethinking Functional Curriculum

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Abstract

There exists a need to examine the practice of pushing functional curriculum to the bottom of the list to teach students with intellectual disabilities (ID). This article discusses how students with these disabilities could better transition into society if they are instructed appropriately. The author further investigates the current practices in other countries. The federally controlled education systems in Germany best demonstrates the need to offer more years of functional curriculum, job training and life skills early in the education of students with ID. Assessments for students with intellectual disabilities needs changed, the United States has a one size fits all approach to accountability and testing. German students trained in a vocational area would be assessed on the areas of study. Early assessments appropriately address how our students learn best. The different types of learners and their areas of interest need to be recognized for successful transition into the community.

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Students with intellectual disabilities need functional skills more than any other population of students. Many of these students will need to know how to read maps, run a cash register, and operate a calculator. Teachers were once able to teach students real life skills but those days are gone. They must cover the academic standards required by the state in a timely manner so to allow them to be appropriately prepared for their state achievement test. When teachers concentrate upon academic standards, our functional curriculum is short changed.

Current Practices

Today's special educators are short-changing our students with a great deal of test preparation and not enough of the skills useful in our real world. When given the opportunity to introduce life skills, such as how to read a city street guide, students can gain the skills necessary for successful employment. They also need to identify the jobs that are available in their community. Students should experience the process of applying and interviewing for positions. With the opportunity to experience real life skills, students can feel an investment in their future.

Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) affirmed that students were more likely to continue in school if the coursework was preparing them for the future, supporting the need for

keeping functional curriculum, job acquisition, and retention skills. In the study student participants answered the following questions:

> Was there one class that prepared you to work and live in the community?
> Was there a class or activity that you were not able to take that would have helped you work and live in the community?
> Was there one person at your school who was most helpful in preparing you to live and work in the community?
> Did school prepare you for what you wanted to do after leaving school?
> Did school prepare you to get a job?
> Did you have a paying job at the time you left high school (Dunn et al., 2004, p. 314).

The major findings indicate the relationship between dropout status and the following four factors: disability status, the identification of a helpful class, the identification of a helpful person, and the belief that school was preparing them for the future (Dunn et al., 2004). This validates the need for coursework that students view as useful to their future.

Students feel vested in their future if their coursework is useful to their future, and teachers of students with intellectual disabilities want to prepare students to have some opportunity for normalcy in their lives. However, many schools do not offer students with intellectual disabilities a community-based functional curriculum to make it possible. Intervention specialists want to get their students prepared, but within the constraints of the current system pushing for standards-based curriculum, this has failed to take place.

Investigations related to transition of students with disabilities have provided beneficial information especially related to parent and student input, as well as early transition training. Garey (2003) recognized essential transition issues in a study involving students with hearing impairments. The study investigated perceptions of students with hearing impairments to identify key services and experiences that enabled their successful transition from secondary and postsecondary education into adult life and employment. The study was conducted through online and face-to-face interviews involving 69 students. The analysis of the information from the study indicated that student participation is crucial; teachers must involve families in the transition process; teachers need to be aware of the feelings of parents; transition planning should start in middle school; transition planning must be sensitive to cultural factors; and transition planning must be comprehensive.

Without the proper training many of our students remain unemployed in the years following the completion of school. Although some students are offered services through the county boards of developmental disabilities, and some students are also served through Goodwill Enterprises and Vocational Guidance Services in the state of Ohio, only a small percentage of the people with intellectual disabilities (ID) are helped through these agencies (Baer, Daviso, McMahan Queen, 2011). According to the Annual State

Report on the Ohio Longitudinal Transition Study, 13% of students were receiving adult services one year after graduation (Baer et al., 2011).

According to Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, and Poirer (2005), the findings from surveys to all state correctional systems of every juvenile under age 22 indicated the population of youth in juvenile corrections served under IDEA to be 33.4% of the total population (n = 8,613). The percentages of these youths in facilities are grouped under the following IDEA categories which include: Emotional Disturbance 47.7%, Specific Learning Disabilities 38.6%, Mental Retardation 9.7%, Other Health Impairments 2.9%, and Multiple Disabilities 0.8% (Quinn et al., 2005). These findings demonstrate that students need a great deal of support to properly prepare for life after high school to prevent incarceration.

Historical Perspective

In the years following the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2004) schools have been looking for higher test scores for our students with ID. Even though a student may not pass the test, the state keeps track of their learning progress under their disability category. The state allows a very small percentage of 1% of the student population to take the alternative assessment and 2% to take the alternative assessment based on modified academic achievement standards. Roach, Beddow, Kurz, Kettler, and Elliot (2010) discussed the development of the modified achievement standard assessment and the percentage of students who take this test, as well as describing it. The modified achievement standard assessment is to be less difficult than a grade level achievement standard but not more challenging than a state's alternative assessment (Roach et al., 2010). The United States Department of Education (ED) revised regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to allow for flexibility for students whose disability will not allow them to be proficient at grade-level. The ED capped this population taking the MAS at 2% from the revision; and the AA at 1% from the NCLB guidelines. The harsh reality is that these scores equate to educational funding. Schools are also required to keep large percentages of students in general curriculum. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act
(IDEIA; 2004) further pushed the mainstreaming of students into the least restrictive environment (LRE). Unfortunately, this is our norm in the United States; however, there are different models from other countries that might be instructive for training and testing students with intellectual disabilities.

Feretti and Eisenman (2010) discussed federal policies' purpose which is to promote educational equality through state accommodation methods. They further recognized that states have increased efforts toward positive outcomes for students with disabilities by focusing their concentration upon the outcomes for students with disabilities. All efforts should be on removing the achievement gap. The authors argued that local cultures on teaching practices and decision making have the first impact on learning experiences and in order to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities we need to examine the cultural and social issues and the way policy is interpreted as to local practices.

World Perspective

In Japan, parents participate in the education of their children with disabilities (Kasahara & Turnbull, 2005). Japanese parents who suspect their child of having a disability consult child guidance centers to advise the appropriate placement of their child (Abe, 1998). The prefectural/municipal placement guidance committees assess the child and suggest placement in special schools or special classes. Japan's special education curriculum is divided into five categories: moral education, special activities, protective care and training, and their academic subjects. Abe (1998) maintained that education for the students with intellectual disabilities is focused on providing them with the skills necessary for their future lives. The optimal situation involves vocational training and life skills instruction to be emphasized in instructional programs.

Florian, Dee, Byers, and Maudslay (2000) discussed the findings of a three-part national survey in the United Kingdom regarding transition for pupils with profound and complex learning difficulties. Their report recognized that the students who are diagnosed with profound and complex learning difficulties often are held in the public school setting until age 19. They further state that students with such difficulties have few opportunities to participate in community life as adults despite the overlapping legal responsibilities of multiple agencies. The authors further concurred that students remain in the same setting often in school, interacting with the same people year after year with little opportunity for change (Florian et al., 2000).

From the National Association of Instruction of Technology Teacher Education (NAITTE) in 1994, Theuerkauf and Weiner discussed how the federal system of education in Germany offers students a different sequence of schooling. They stated that vocational and community training is incorporated into the program for education of students with disabilities. Furthermore, they pointed out that vocational training is to qualify students for a trade or a specific profession. Their system starts with kindergarten, then the elementary school, at which point the students are sent on to the general secondary school, the secondary modern school, or the high school. After the student completes the first level of the secondary education, they then are able to attend a second level of secondary education. At the time they receive their "Abitur" or school leaving certificate, they can enter vocational training or academic studies. It is at this stage where the students receive more training than the students in the United States. This allows the student with disabilities to learn valuable skills to be able to integrate into community employment and life.

Grünke (2006) investigated a supported employment program implemented with 172 students with severe learning difficulties between 14 and 18 years of age in their last year of school. In the project, 60 university students were trained as job coaches and taught skills essential to gaining employment. The students with learning difficulties received training to foster inductive reasoning or training to enhance job-related self efficacy. The project's success was demonstrated by a percentage of the young people who were able to start an apprenticeship in the open labor market compared to the usual success rate of vocational integration (Grünke 2006).

Grünke (2006) further recognized that the following five conditions need to be met to have students with learning difficulties achieve employment: continuous and individual support, early introduction to the world of employment, individual fostering of intellectual abilities, individual fostering of emotional stability, and continuous monitoring of all endeavors. In order to maintain accountability and to successfully integrate students into society as well as the workplace, assessments need to take place to evaluate the preparedness of our youth with disabilities.

Phelps (2006) discussed the European and Asian process of testing students upon completion of their various educational programs. Differentiation starts in the lower secondary (middle school) and exists in almost all schools in the upper-secondary level. He stated the testing is a reflection of their educational program. Students are differentiated by curricular emphasis and ability level and so are their tests. The author further discussed that students attend schools with vastly different occupational orientations: advanced academic schools to prepare for university, general schools for the working world, or direct entry into a skilled trade (2006).

Transition Services in the United States

Garey (2003) recognized essential transition issues in a study involving deaf students. The study investigated perceptions of students with hearing impairments to identify key services and experiences that enabled their successful transition from secondary and postsecondary education into adult life and employment. The study was conducted through online and face-to-face interviews involving 69 students. The analysis of the information from the study indicated that student participation is critical; teachers must involve families in the transition process; teachers need to be aware of the feelings of parents; and transition planning should start in middle school, must be sensitive to cultural factors, and must be comprehensive.

Grandin (2006) recognized the importance of electives in schools when addressing students with autism. She stated that it is a concern when music, woodshop, auto mechanics, and electives aren't offered in schools. With these courses students with uneven skills would do well and become employable in the community. Grandin (2006) examined the method a high school uses to measures its students' success through outcomes. Students who do have post school goals focused on college attendance; an alternative post school goal would be gaining and maintaining employment that will provide a comfortable standard of living.

Wolk (2004) acknowledged that we need to address the individual's strengths and that we should think outside the box. He stated that there are important questions we should ask and they are: How do we guide our kids through their very challenging formative years so that they emerge as responsible young adults with the skills and attitudes they need to function and thrive in a rapidly changing world? What do we want every child to achieve?

Wolk (2004) related a story of a 16-year-old named Jesse, who was bored in school and intent on dropping out. His principal knew that Jesse liked to work so he made him a deal to attend classes in the mornings and work as a janitor for $5 an hour in the afternoons. Jesse worked hard and improved the appearance of the school grounds doing landscaping. This young man's future is more promising because his principal was flexible and allowed Jesse to work. He did not drop out and learned a sense of self-worth and pride in one's work. With recognizing the individual strengths and needs of our students with special needs the thinking types approach helps guide educators. Grandin (2006) postulates three thinking types of students with autism:

1. Visual Thinkers—good with hands-on work and think in pictures.
2. Pattern Thinkers—good at music and math. They think in patterns and relationships between numbers instead of pictures and they are often good at chess. They think in patterns instead of specific photographic images.
3. Word Specialists—usually poor at visual thinking but will know every sport or weather statistic. Their favorite subjects in school are often history and foreign language.

These three types of thinkers have so much to offer the community workplace. If we could identify the thinking style of the student, we could then identify work environments and activities. Another assessment to assist in the transition process has been developed to help youth build upon their talents.

The Clifton Youth Strengths Explorer, developed by the Gallup Organization, is a measurement that is being used to help youth build upon their talents. The Clifton Youth Strength Explorer goals are:

- Help youths identify their positive characteristics
- Help youths improve their understanding of self
- Help youths develop from their areas of greatest talent
- Improve parents'/instructors' understanding of their children/students
- Provide an opportunity for an important kind of communication between parents and their children (i.e., discussion of one's unique nature, the positive characteristics/gifts that one has, and how those can be developed).
- Provide the theme-based language that youths and parents/instructors could use to discover and describe positive characteristics (Gallup Organization 2006, pp. 183-189).

The instrument provides measures of talent in presence, confidence, competing, relating, achieving, future thinker, caring, discoverer, organizer, and dependability. With the talent-based approach educators can help youth achieve their maximum potential. The Gallup Organization (2006) recognizes that addressing deficits and challenges is not sufficient to help youth become healthy, fully functioning individuals. They feel in order to have healthier outcomes that educators must develop a positive psychological focus on the identified talents and build upon them (Gallup Organization 2006). They have provided a sound measurement to identify and capitalize on the talents of our youth.

Scanlon and Mellard (2002) interviewed 270 young adults with and without Learning Disabilities/Emotional Behavior Disorders (LD/EBD) inquiring about their post-dropout experiences. Those students who were interviewed said that they were not satisfied with their own preparation for independence . Many students lacked self-confidence in work or academic skills, control of their lives, or self-esteem (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Wolk (2004) stated that we should have parallel schools and that they should offer curricula that are personalized by advisors, parents, and students. He stated that the students could participate in apprenticeships and internships with adult mentors in businesses, hospitals, government agencies and other employers to experience the need for punctuality, teamwork, and attention to detail. Wolk suggested that students be able to do service learning in hospitals and other human service positions to see democratic processes and politics at work. Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, and Powers (2008) suggested when addressing the sources of support and impediments to a successful transition to adulthood, female students with disabilities stated that employment chances would increase if given more exposure to job training opportunities and paid work experience in their areas of interest.

Xin, Grasso, Dipipi-Hoy, and Jitendra (2005) examined the effects of purchasing skill instruction on individuals with intellectual disabilities. They found that purchasing skills were necessary for the transition of students into life in the community; however, they felt that these skills should be taught in the elementary grades to increase functional competence in the later years. The current trend is increasing placements in inclusionary general academic settings for students with intellectual disabilities (Xin et al., 2005). With that in consideration the authors further concluded that functional life skills are important and can be built upon basic academic skills.

Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, and Mack (2002) addressed the current challenges facing secondary education and transition services. Based upon the research they have identified key issues influencing implementation of the federal transition requirements of the IDEA Amendments of 1997. Their findings suggested that students should be allowed to have access to general education curriculum but also to develop essential adult-life skills. They further reflected that the students should not only have general education curriculum but that they should have community-based work experience, vocational education, dropout prevention and reentry programs, and independent living skills programs.

While making an investment in our future, we should explore all of our options. In the process we can appropriately serve our citizens with intellectual disabilities. With success in the community workplace, students with intellectual disabilities will gain autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency. It is through this that the individual becomes a stakeholder in their future. In the role of stakeholder they take responsibility and have ownership to their life situations. If intervention specialists are to prepare the students with intellectual disabilities, they need to work with the abilities of each student and help

to guide them to a position where their gifts will be useful. Students with intellectual disabilities need a transition process where opportunities exist to afford a way to function in society. The current special education laws need to work to keep their outcomes as a priority.

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